

# Innovators Series

## University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

With very little parking on campus, as well as strictly enforced parking in adjacent neighborhoods, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM) needed a solution for its ongoing parking crunch. In addition, a growing student and employee population, as well as increasing tensions between the school and city residents, worsened the problem.

After examining the options, the university determined that by establishing a comprehensive commuter benefits program, it could save money, provide a benefit that employees value, and—at the same time—take an active step to reduce ozone (smog) in the area. The school's commuter benefits program is now so successful that nearly 40 percent of the faculty and staff commute to work by means other than driving alone.

### Campus Considerations

Situated on 90 acres in a residential area of Milwaukee, the university's urban setting means that space for parking is at a premium—in fact, only 2,000 parking spaces need to serve 4,000 employees and 25,000 students. In addition, costs and land availability constrain the university's capacity to build new parking structures. While UWM does have plans to build a new underground parking structure, it will cost \$30 million for only 630 spaces—that's more than \$47,000 per space.

In addition to the construction costs, the need to improve air quality in the area was a significant factor that led the school to take a proactive approach to discourage people from driving to campus. Milwaukee is in “severe” nonattainment for the 1-hour ozone standard, meaning that the area has more than one day per year when the highest hourly value exceeds the EPA threshold (see <http://www.epa.gov/oar/oaqps/greenbk/o3co.html> for information on nonattainment areas).

As a first step to combat these problems, the university switched from a flat fee (employees were paying for parking with one annual lump-sum fee) to a “pay-as-you-go” parking system, which has significantly decreased the number of employees and students who commute to work alone. Bill Bergstrom, manager of operations for the school's parking and transportation system, says, “With the pay-as-you-go system, people really “feel” the full cost of parking. The new system has helped change people's behavior and encouraged more people to use other modes to get to work.”

While many employees choose to live within a two-mile radius of campus, enjoying the university's prime location near Lake Michigan and investing in the high property values of the surrounding neighborhoods, other employees and students have long-distance commutes from neighboring counties. The university had to provide viable commute options for both short- and long-distance commuters.

### A Comprehensive Package

To reduce the number of faculty and staff driving alone to work, UWM took a comprehensive approach when planning its commuter benefits program. In 1972, there were three bus lines coming to campus. Through increased transit awareness and financial initiatives the university incorporated major changes along with the Milwaukee County Transit System. By 1980 twelve bus lines were serving the campus, four of them from remote park-and-ride

### At-A-Glance

**Employer:** University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

**Location:** Milwaukee, Wisconsin

**One of the Best Workplaces for Commuters<sup>SM</sup> Since:** 2005

#### Commuter Benefits:

Bus pass subsidy

Free parking for carpoolers

Emergency ride home program

Rideshare matching

Onsite amenities

Flexible work schedules

lots. Called the "UBus" program, students and staff could purchase reduced fare bus tickets to ride on these particular routes. The UBus program reduced UWM related parking in the neighborhood by approximately 800 vehicles.

In 1994, UWM changed the subsidized UBus ticket program to the UPass program. Students willingly accepted a \$30 per semester tuition increase to cover the costs of the unlimited use bus pass for an entire semester. With 60 percent of students utilizing the UPass program, UWM implemented a similar program for staff in 1998. The program helped increase staff participation by 20 percent and further decreased the number of cars coming to campus and circling while looking for parking spaces. The university pays two-thirds of the total cost of the pass while employees pay the remaining one-third. By 2000, the University created several park and ride lots 3 to 4 miles from campus, thus further reducing the number of cars coming to campus.

In addition to the UPass program, the school pays approximately \$62,000 per year to a local bus company (Wisconsin Coach Lines) for a dedicated shuttle from the western part of the greater Milwaukee area; employees ride at no cost with their bus pass. About 500 employees and students take advantage of the bus subsidy options. The total number of people using alternative transportation makes the university the second largest trip generator for the county transit system next to downtown commuters.

The university augments its bus subsidy with a number of other options, including free on-campus parking for employees participating in carpools. In a two-person carpool, the riders receive nine days of free parking. The numbers then increase as the number of carpoolers increase: three-person carpools receive 12 days of free parking, and four-person carpools receive 15 days of free parking. Additionally, the employees in the bus pass program receive four days of free parking per quarter simply for participating. Faculty and staff can also take advantage of onsite amenities such as ATMs and cafes, enjoy the freedom of flexible work schedules, and, in case of emergency, the school offers an emergency ride home program through Milwaukee County Transit.

To gauge employee satisfaction, the university Parking and Transit Department has made itself accessible by advertising heavily for alternative transportation systems and providing a telephone number for customer comments. In addition, the department markets the program via ads in student newspapers, talks to all incoming students, information packets to new staff, and a yearly reminder to staff regarding transportation options.

"One of our goals is to make commuter benefits convenient," says Mr. Bergstrom. "Once people are able to try commuting to work another way, they can learn how it often relieves the pressure of the daily grind."

## **Continued Growth and Recognition**

The expansiveness of UWM's commuter benefits program as well as the program's budget clearly illustrate the university's commitment to creating a commuter-friendly campus, providing outstanding benefits to its employees, and improving local air quality. Employees and students have responded positively since the start of the university's program. The bus pass program has become especially popular in recent years with the increase in construction and decrease in available parking. From 2004 to 2005, usage of the bus subsidy increased by nearly 100 employees.

As one of the Best Workplaces for Commuters since 2005, UWM sees this designation as an opportunity to add legitimacy to its local commuter programs and provide a link to other transportation issues around the country. UWM's UPass program has also been recognized by the Milwaukee County Transit System and by Wisconsin Partners for Clear Air.